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Lorna Simpson, Review

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Lorna Simpson: Photoworks and Films, 1986-2002

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Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin

There is a compelling confluence at the heart of Lorna Simpson's practice: she wants to make invisible the stereotypes associated with her subjects, while the works themselves more often than not refer to hidden narratives. 'She saw him disappear by the river/They asked her to tell what had happened only to discount her memory'. This text from *Waterbearer*, 1986, accompanies an image of a girl in a plain white shift with her back to the viewer, her arms outstretched pouring water, in one hand, from a metal jug and in the other from a plastic container. One of the first images you encounter in 'Lorna Simpson Photoworks and Films, 1986-2002' at the Irish Museum of Modern Art Dublin, the narrative referred to in the text is effectively a multi-layered subversion of how the image might be read. In keeping with her work, attempting to read the *Waterbearer* is challenging: the closer you look, the less certain you become. In fact, after a trip through the exhibition there is an overwhelming sense of having not quite got the full picture. This is the crux of Simpson's intention, as her works demand close reading and repeated encounters. Frustrating the viewer in this way may not be her primary concern, but it is the means by which she draws attention to a practice that began with a wish to alter perceptions of stereotypes associated with race and gender. Highly considered constructions of artifice, her works in reality defy the limitations of repeated comparisons made between her and her contemporaries (such as Kruger, Holzer, Mae Weems and Piper) whose coincidences of formal similarities and thematic concerns are constantly emphasised in various theoretical critiques. Such glib relations only take the viewer further away from the source of Simpson's distinction: her ability to raise more questions than she answers which lends unshakable poignancy to the work. An agenda further emphasised by her own articulation that her oeuvre is not intended to be monolithic.

The exhibition at IMMA demonstrates this beyond reproach and presents a representative sample of key phases in her practice to date, from her early photo-text works of the 1980's up to their more recent incarnations, along with two of her films. Unfortunately, it is a somewhat cramped installation; the intimate room sizes at IMMA have rarely seemed so restrictive. Aside from the placement of the films at either end -

beginning with *Easy to Remember*, 2001 and concluding with *Call Waiting*, 1997 - the exhibition displays a chronological development. Early iconic works such as *Waterbearer*, 1986, and *You're Fine*, 1988, indicate how Simpson's practice from the outset centred on interrogating the relationship between systems of representation and notions of truth. The art historical awareness of both these works affirmed her commitment to pursuing a language of art that is conscious of its gallery context. The poised pose of the girl in *Waterbearer* refers to traditional subjects in the history of art such as a woman bearing sustenance and the grander theme of justice, while the odalesque-type figure of *You're Fine*, lies prone and clothed with her back to us in order that she might reverse the aspect of Manet's *Olympia*. Acknowledging and then thwarting the voyeuristic expectation of the viewer, Simpson's early works address themselves to questioning assumptions underlying social representations of the female and frustrating the art of looking.

Belying the veracity of photography, Simpson pushes visual representation to its credible limits by the incorporation or juxtaposition of text. Also, by occasionally breaking out of the frame of a single image Simpson draws attention to the fractured nature of representation, as evident in the fragmentation of the image in *You're Fine*. Recent works in this exhibition, taken from the series 'Cameos and Appearances', 2001/2002, reveal a sustained interest in exploring the framing of identity. Taking a historic cue from miniature portrait form, and also alluding to the filmic notion of the brief distinguished appearance of a character, these works are made up of grid patterns of small portrait photographs, juxtaposed with lists of film and painting titles suggestive of their period. Though the formal and conceptual logic is consistent with the other works in the exhibition, these seem somewhat out of place in this installation. Caught somewhere between the bold authority of the earlier photoworks and the subtle playfulness of her films, this selection from 'Cameos and Appearances' appears oddly delicate and unresolved.

In contrast, *The Park*, 1995 and the *Clock Tower*, 1995, taken from the series 'Public Sex', 1995, confirm an assertive stopping point in her exploration of the scripting of images. Both are large (100 ½ x 90 inches) serigraphs on felt – the sort of velvety texture it's difficult to resist touching – with small text panels on either side. The texts are imaginary musings, activities and conversations of unseen and unknown people, that lend a dark wondering to the images; here again the invisible plays a significant role. In an insightful stroke of installation decision-making, *Looking Devices*, 1996, is hung in the

same room. This image is a series of photographs of the artist's own collection of various looking devices, such as cameras and binoculars. As an array, the work is testament to controlling power of vision pivotal to lens-based observation and self-aware art practice.

The culmination of the exhibition is *Call Waiting*, 1997, a video installation of a black and white film. A related suite of twelve silver gelatin prints of stills is on display in the ante-room of this installation. The unfolding action of the film itself, which is of a little over thirteen minutes duration, centres on a set of characters whose interconnectivity is suggested when their phone conversations overlap. The telephone as medium of misunderstanding, mischief, revelation and deceit is exploited to the full in this sequence. True to her promotion of intrigue, Simpson never reveals precisely how these people relate to each other. The narrative, if it can be called that, is propelled as characters switch between calls waiting, making calls and receiving them and so, as one story begins another intervenes until the film concludes when a call remains unanswered. With a welcome lightness of touch, *Call Waiting* incorporates the elements of what Simpson does best: configuring incidents of anecdote with generic experience which facilitates the re-reading of image, text and voice through fictitious account. The invisible stories that simmer beneath the surface of her works effectively alter perceptions of the stereotypes she addresses, as the provocation of not knowing the tale forces the viewer to reconsider the teller.

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